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# Negotiating Reality as An Approach to Intercultural Competence

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**Abstract**[*]

In an increasingly global business environment, managers must interact effectively with people who have different values, behavioral norms, and ways of perceiving reality. Many jobs now entail an international dimension, so the need to develop intercultural competences has taken on a greater importance for more people in business than ever before. Intercultural competence is the ability to recognize and use cultural differences as a resource for learning and for generating effective responses in specific contexts. We conceive of this as “negotiating reality.” The approach draws on concepts from international management, sociology, cross-cultural psychology, action science and conflict resolution.

**Zusammenfassung**

In einer zunehmend globalisierten Umwelt müssen Führungskräfte immer häufiger mit Menschen aus anderen Kulturen zusammenzuarbeiten, die unterschiedliche Wertevorstellungen haben, verschiedene Verhaltensnormen pflegen und ihre jeweils eigene Wahrnehmung der Realität haben. Damit steigt der Bedarf an interkultureller Kompetenz, der Fähigkeit, kulturelle Unterschiede als Lernressourcen zu erkennen und für die jeweilige Situation adäquate Lösungen zu erarbeiten und einzusetzen. Dieser Beitrag beschreibt einen innovativen Ansatz, den wir "negotiating reality" nennen, der sich aus unterschiedlichen Theoriebereichen, u.a. dem internationalen Management, der Soziologie, der interkulturellen Psychologie, und der Konfliktforschung speist.

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In an increasingly global business environment, managers must interact effectively with people who have different values, behavioral norms, and ways of perceiving reality. Many jobs now entail an international dimension, so the challenge of communicating ideas and making decisions with people from different cultural backgrounds is no longer limited to a relatively elite group of expatriate managers who develop skills and knowledge by living abroad for years at a time (Adler, 2002; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992; Berthoin Antal, 2000). The need to develop intercultural competencies has taken on a greater importance for more people in business than ever before (Gregersen, Morrison & Black, 1998). Another feature of the intensification of intercultural interactions in recent years is their diversity. Many managers have to be able to interact effectively with people from very varied backgrounds, often for only short periods—a negotiation, a task force—and with little or no time to acquire knowledge about the cultures that the others come from (Berthoin Antal, 1995; Davison & Ward, 1999). Under these circumstances, managers need to come equipped with intercultural competence more than with knowledge about a culture that is foreign to them (Barham & Berthoin Antal, 1994; Barham & Wills, 1992). They can then draw on their intercultural competence to learn what they need to know about the culturally shaped expectations and norms of their counterparts in each new situation.

The kind of intercultural competence required today is the ability to recognize and use cultural differences as a resource for learning and for the design of effective action in specific contexts. We share the assumption that the more people "differ, the more they have to teach and learn from each other. To do so, of course, there must be mutual respect and sufficient curiosity to overcome the frustrations" (Barnlund, 1998: 51) that often accompany intercultural encounters. The core elements of intercultural competence therefore include an active awareness of oneself as a complex cultural being and the effect of one’s own culture on thinking and action, an ability to engage with others to explore tacit assumptions that underlie behavior and goals, and an openness to testing out different ways of thinking and doing things. These competencies enable people to discover differing views of reality, making it more likely that they will create common understandings and generate collaborative action. We conceive of these as the skills of "negotiating reality."

No single discipline suffices to capture the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of the impact of culture on interactions, nor is there one body of theory that provides guidance for developing approaches to dealing more effectively with the challenges the dynamics of such interactions pose. Our approach to intercultural competence draws on research and concepts from international management, sociology, cross-cultural psychology, action science, and conflict resolution. We begin by discussing definitions of culture and exploring the implications of conceiving of individuals as complex cultural beings who draw on a repertoire of culturally shaped worldviews and behavioral norms and practices when interacting with other people. Based on a review of the dominant models for learning to deal with cultural differences, we then describe our approach of "negotiating reality" and how it address the gaps left by current conceptualizations.

## Culture and the challenge of intercultural interactions

The role of culture in the world of business has been the subject of research for at least thirty years, prompted particularly by the growth of multinational corporations and the increase in international business interactions. Researchers have studied how different national cultures influence organizational behavior and the interactions of managers from different cultural backgrounds (e.g. Adler, 2002; Early & Erez, 1997; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Laurent, 1983; Schneider & Barsoux, 1997; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). This research has benefited from earlier work on intercultural interactions outside the private sector, namely in the context of organizations like the Peace Corps and the Foreign Service (e.g. Fisher, 1997; Harrison & Hopkins, 1967). An additional stream of research on culture in business emerged in the 1980s about corporate cultures and subcultures and their impact on organizational perceptions, strategies and performance (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 1991; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Dierkes, Hähner & Berthoin Antal, 1997; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985). The literature in all these streams of research has drawn heavily, implicitly or explicitly, on concepts of culture from anthropology, especially the work of Florence Kluckhohn with Fred Strodtbeck (1961) and Clifford Geertz (1973).

## *Understanding culture*

One of the most commonly used and simple definitions of culture in the literature on culture and business has been provided by Geert Hofstede, who conducted the first major empirical multi-country study of culture's consequences for management[1]. He defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another"[2] (Hofstede, 1980: 25). Edgar Schein (1985, 1990) offers a more detailed and useful definition, based on several anthropological schools. He summarizes culture as

> "a pattern of basic assumptions--invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration--that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1985: 9).

This approach also assumes that culture is something relatively stable, deeply rooted in fundamental values and assumptions about the world. According to a dominant tradition in social anthropology (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961), every culture seeks to make sense of the world and of the role of humans in it by providing answers to five[3] basic questions:

1. What is the character of human nature? For example, are humans "naturally" good or do they tend to evil if not properly controlled?
2. What is the relationship of humans to the environment? For example, do humans control the environment, do the forces of nature control them, or do they seek harmony with their environment?

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[1] Hofstede collected his data in 1968 and in 1972 in 72 national subsidiaries of IBM, receiving over 116,000 questionnaires with more than 100 standardized questions in each. His model has spawned a great deal of research by academics around the world, despite the methodological and conceptual flaws in his approach (see McSweeney, 2002).

[2] It is not surprising that Hofstede employed a computer metaphor since his research was conducted in IBM.

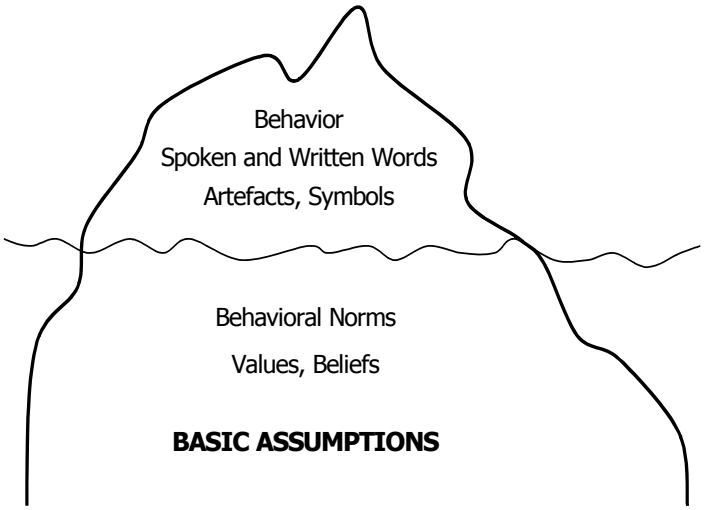
[3] Most of the literature on culture distinguishes between these five dimensions. However, Hofstede's first study used only four; he did not include the dimension of time; and other scholars have noted a sixth dimension according to which cultures vary, namely the use of space (e.g. Hall & Hall, 1990; see also Adler, 2002). Schein also applied five dimensions, four of which correspond to those used by Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, but he subsumed the dimensions of time and space into a dimension he called "the nature of reality and truth" (1985: 86).

3. What is the temporal focus of life? The first distinction made by anthropologists in this category refers to the primary temporal focus (past, present, or future) of a culture and the relationship between the three timeframes (e.g. does the past determine the present, is the future the most important frame to orient one's existence?). A second cultural distinction relating to time refers to the way people attend to activities at a point in time (e.g. is it best to focus on one thing at a time, should one engage in several things at once?[4])
4. What is the modality of human activity? For example, is the focus of human action on "being," "doing", or "becoming" (e.g. achieving tasks, on the development of the self, simply on spontaneity in living)?
5. What is the relationship of humans to other humans? For example, is greater value placed on the individual than on the collectivity?

Each culture generates a constellation of answers to these questions, forming the basic assumptions shared by members of the culture and thereby providing the moral and cognitive underpinning for their worldview and behavior. A useful metaphor for culture is an iceberg, whereby the assumptions about how the world works and the role of individuals, upon which the culture is based, remain invisible. The deep cultural assumptions shape the norms and values that the members of a culture share, and these, too, are predominantly tacit so they are part of the iceberg below the surface of the water (Berthoin Antal, 1987, 2002). Only a small part of culture is visible, such as behavior, rituals, symbols, and written rules. These visible elements are an expression of the underlying cultural assumptions, norms and values.

[4] Edward T. Hall distinguishes between monochronic and polychronic systems, and he believes that "like oil and water, the two systems do not mix." (1998: 60). Monochronic cultures treat time as linear, easily dividable into segments, and almost tangible, "as something that can be 'spent,' 'saved,' 'wasted,' and 'lost.'" (1998: 60).

**Figure 1: Applying the Metaphor of Culture as Iceberg**




The dominant perspective the literature intercultural management conceives of culture[5] as an overarching structure that shapes the way members of a group learn to see and define things (Geertz, 1973). It provides the means through which people within a community share and develop modes of thinking and behavior. Culture defined in this way is created by groups and transmitted to individuals through processes of socialization and maintained through the institutions embedded in the culture. These institutions, in the form of explicit or implicit rules as well as models and templates for behavior and interpretation, for example, “may negatively constrain action, define opportunity, and facilitate patterns of interaction” (Clemens & Cook, 1999: 445). Culture contributes to individual and group identity because it "gives people a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave and of what they should not be doing" (Harris & Moran, 1991: 12).

This conception of culture is applicable to numerous levels and units, ranging from nations, ethnic groups, professions, organizations, religions, and just about any other type of group with relatively stable membership over time. Some cultural units cut across others, while other cultural units are subsets of larger units. Regional cultures (e.g. European) may cut across the boundaries of several national cultures, or they

may apply to regions within a country, like northern Germany as distinct from southern Germany. Corporate cultures are shaped to a large extent by the national and regional culture in which they operate, influencing the management style, structures, and processes (Adler, 2002; Lee et al., 2000). In some multinational corporations the organizational culture and the management style are dominated by the values and behavioral norms of the country of origin; in other corporations the subsidiaries establish their own cultures in consonance with the local culture; and in yet others a mix of cultural influences is created (Davison & Ward, 1999; Schneider & Barsoux, 1997).

## *Misunderstanding culture*

Intercultural interactions represent challenges because individuals have to find ways of communicating with people whose culturally shaped expectations and behaviors may differ from their own. They do not necessarily share similar basic assumptions about how the world works and what is appropriate behavior for individuals in the system because their cultures have developed a different constellation of answers to the five core questions identified by anthropologists. As a result, "people from different countries see, interpret, and evaluate events differently, and consequently act upon them differently" (Adler, 2002: 77). In terms of the iceberg metaphor of culture: individuals do not see below the surface to understand what is underpinning the worldview and expectations of a person from a different cultural background. Intercultural misunderstandings and conflict occur when people interpret and judge what they see "above the waterline" of another person's iceberg, so to speak, according to the submerged part of their own iceberg, their norms, values, and assumptions (Berthoin Antal, 2002). The behavior of others may seem strange, illogical, or outright "barbaric" (Barnlund, 1998: 39).

Cultural misunderstandings occur in interactions not only when difference is observed and misinterpreted, but also when surface similarities (e.g. in language, dress and etiquette) mask significant differences at the deeper, submerged levels. In

[5] As Swidler notes, however, "among sociologists and anthropologists, debate has raged for several academic generations over defining the term 'culture.'" (1986: 273). See also Czarniawska, 2001.

fact, the "assumption of similarity" is one of the greatest stumbling blocks to intercultural communication (Barna, 1998: 173). Without clear markers of difference, other people's unanticipated behavior may appear especially inappropriate and inexplicable. Cultural misunderstandings are often experienced as conflicts, and the conflicts are seen as threats not only to goal achievement, but also to the sense of self-respect, competence and identity of the people involved (Rothman, 1997; Rothman & Friedman, 2001). As a result, intercultural situations are often framed as problems that need to be solved in order to allow managers to avoid conflict and to perform effectively (e.g. Early & Erez, 1997; Sebenius, 2002; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

Conceptualizing culture in terms of very general constructs at a national level provides a powerful explanatory framework for making sense of intercultural problems in management. Furthermore, it enables researchers to generate tools (e.g. attitude questionnaires) for conducting empirical comparative studies of management and organization (e.g. the GLOBE project, see House, Javidan, Hanges & Dorfman, 2002). This research has played an important role in showing that cultural differences exist and must be taken into account in management. As a result of this research, managers cannot assume that successful management practices and innovations developed in one country are universally appropriate and effective.

There are, however, significant conceptual and practical drawbacks to an approach that sees national culture as a distinct, overarching system for guiding behaviors. First, it tends to classify individuals and groups in terms of a single culture (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martinez, 2000), failing to account for the fact that it is possible for individuals or groups to be members of different cultures at the same time. Second, the unitary perspective assigns a causal link between cultural values and behavior that is too simple and deterministic. The next section addresses these two drawbacks, laying the groundwork for grappling with the third drawback, namely: the generality that makes this approach such a powerful descriptive and explanatory tool exacts a price in terms of guiding action.

Researchers in the dominant tradition provide insights into another culture and they conclude that managers should adapt to the cultural norms of their local partners in order to be effective (e.g. Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). This approach treats the application of insight as relatively unproblematic. It skirts the issue of how people can break out of their own cultural frameworks and expand the range of interpretations and behaviors they can draw on in dealing with situations for which their own cultural background has not adequately prepared them. As McSweeney (2002) concluded after reviewing the drawbacks of the dominant approach on national cultures, "we need to engage with and use theories of action which can cope with change, power, variety, multiple influences—including the non-national—and the complexity and situational variability of the individual subject" (113). The "negotiating reality" approach discussed in a later section grapples with the drawbacks of the dominant approach precisely in the spirit recommended by McSweeney.

## Individuals as culturally complex beings

Once one is sensitive to culture as an important factor in human behavior, it becomes clear that individuals can be amazingly culturally complex, or "cultural composites" (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997: 176). Individuals are complex cultural beings because they belong to several cultural entities (e.g. country, school, sports club, company) over the course of a lifetime, and often at a single point in time. For example, a particular person may be a member of the Sicilian culture, professionally trained in the engineering culture, and working in the corporate culture of Fiat in Turin—or in DaimlerChrysler in Stuttgart. Furthermore, that person will be a man or a woman, and many if not all cultures contain beliefs that differentiate between the roles of men and women in the system, assigning gender-specific behavioral norms and implying different functions in structures and decision-making processes.

Each culture to which an individual belongs or has belonged influences the individual's perception of reality and behavioral norms. As Hofstede points out, the values embedded in the different cultures to which individuals belong simultaneously "are not necessarily in harmony. In modern society they are often partly conflicting:

for example, religious values may conflict with generation values; gender values with organizational practices" (Hofstede, 1991: 10).

### *The unpredictability of interactions between culturally complex beings*

The fact that individuals are complex cultural beings whose perceptions of and responses to a situation are influenced by the various cultures to which they belong has significant implications for intercultural interactions. For example, research on international negotiations shows that "while national culture can tell you a lot about the person sitting across the table from you, every individual represents a number of cultures, each of which affect negotiation style" (Sebenius, 2002: 85). Studies of bicultural individuals, for example, have shown that they switch from one cultural frame to another, confounding attempts to predict how they will interpret particular stimuli (Hong et al., 2000). "Conflicting mental programs within people make it difficult to anticipate their behavior in a new situation" (Hofstede, 1991: 11).

Applying the concept of culture broadly beyond national culture to other units and levels like professional and organizational cultures, there is even a logic to saying that "an individual is in fact functioning somewhat 'inter-culturally' whenever he or she communicates with another individual" (Singer, 1998: 103). Returning to the iceberg metaphor, the implication is that individuals compose their own culturally-layered icebergs over the course of a life-time, building up answers to the five key cultural questions, and they tap into their repositories, largely unconsciously, to guide their responses to situations that arise. An intercultural interaction, then, is not a matter of sitting atop a "standardized" iceberg generated by a single culture and attempting to decode the other person's behavior by drawing on knowledge about a given culture's "standardized" iceberg. Achieving effective communication entails engaging with the other to make sense of reality in a specific situation.

Of course, it is not only the fact that people belong to multiple cultures with often inconsistent and conflicting worldviews and behavioral norms that leads to their unpredictability. People are not simply culturally shaped beings: they also have individual personalities. Furthermore, independent of culture, people may espouse

contradictory values in different situations or say one thing but do something very different (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978).

## *Building repertoires and strategies of action*

None of the bodies of theory relating to cultures has grappled satisfactorily with the cultural complexity of individuals. Fortunately, however, recent studies in cross-cultural psychology and, quite independently, in sociology as well, have generated two constructs that are particularly useful for understanding how individuals draw on different culturally shaped ways of seeing and dealing with situations: repertoires and strategies of action.

Cross-cultural psychology, like other disciplines, has traditionally regarded the influence of culture on cognition as continual and constant.

> Cultural knowledge is conceptualized to be like a contact lens that affects the individual's perceptions of visual stimuli all of the time . . . (leaving) little room for a second internalized culture within an individual's psychology. In sum, the methods and assumptions of cross-cultural psychology have not fostered the analysis of how individuals incorporate more than one culture. (Hong et al., 2000: 709)

The dominant paradigms of cultural psychology, as well as sociology, treat the influence of multiple cultures on an individual simply as a source of error variance. However, some scholars propose a "dynamic constructivist approach" (Hong et al., 2000), which lays the groundwork for understanding individuals as culturally complex beings. This approach describes internalized culture as "a loose network of domain-specific knowledge structures, such as categories and implicit theories" (Hong et al., 2000: 710) rather than as an integrated and highly generalized structure. In other words, this perspective views people as having a wide repertoire of theories for interpreting reality. The fact that they possess a particular construct does not necessarily mean that it is always at work. In practice, only a small portion of an individual's knowledge comes to the fore and guides interpretation. Individuals can possess multiple, and even contradicting, theories, although only one theory can guide cognition at any given moment.

The conceptualization of culture as a source of repertoire from which people draw when making sense of and responding to situations has emerged in sociological thinking as well. Swidler (1986), critical of prevailing theories that tie behavior too deterministically to cultural values and conceive of culture as "a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction" (277), suggests building on the work of Hannerz (1969), who studied ghetto communities in the United States. She proposes that culture should be seen as offering a "repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed" (284). Each culture provides a limited set of resources "which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems " (Swidler, 1986: 273), rather than imposing a monolithic set of norms for thinking and acting.

The concept of strategies of action constructed from a repertoire provided by culture is useful in understanding individuals as culturally complex beings. They have at their disposal a repertoire generated by the various cultures to which they belong. The repertoire consists of multiple habits, practices, values and beliefs from which people draw in responding to a situation, but the process of constructing a strategy of action is not "a plan consciously devised to attain a goal" (Swidler, 1986: 277). In fact, people are generally unaware of the process of drawing on their culturally shaped repertoires when interacting with one another, which is precisely what enables them to be culturally competent within their community. This competence born of experience, however, often becomes a stumbling block in intercultural interactions.

## *Discovering and overcoming constraints in repertoires*

A noteworthy implication of the repertoire concept is that culture not only offers a range of responses to its members, it also *constrains* the range of responses available to an individual. To the extent that certain practices or ideas are either unknown or considered unacceptable in a given culture, individuals are limited in their ability to understand or respond to people with a different culturally shaped repertoire. Herein lies the challenge of intercultural interactions.

Individuals tend not to consider how their cultural backgrounds shape their repertoire until the experience misunderstandings or their behavior does not generate the response they would have expected within their usual cultural community (Adler, 2002). *Cultural* competence is in essence the ability to generate appropriate strategies of action unconsciously, but *inter*cultural competence is the ability to explore one's repertoire and actively construct an appropriate strategy. Intercultural competence involves overcoming the constraints embedded in an individual's culturally shaped repertoire, creating new responses, and thereby expanding the repertoire of potential interpretations and behaviors available in future intercultural interactions.

Overcoming constraints in repertoires entails reframing intercultural situations as learning opportunities. To the extent that cultural misunderstandings and conflicts are defined as problems to be avoided, the chance to learn is also avoided. A single repertoire is likely to fall short of providing the best action strategy for making sense of and responding to the unique circumstances of each intercultural interaction. Under these conditions, the existence of different repertoires held by the individuals engaged in an interaction means that a potentially richer, more varied store of cultural wisdom is available for achieving goals and solving problems. The challenge of intercultural interactions lies not so much in avoiding the clash of "cultural icebergs" or even in resolving conflicts, but rather in skillfully tapping this richness. In other words, the individuals involved in an interaction need to become aware of the repertoires available to them through the cultures that have shaped them, and experiment with ways of selecting, combining, and refining their repertoires to meet the demands of a specific situation.

## Prevailing strategies for developing intercultural competence

A commonly used model differentiates six stages of learning to perceive and work with cultural differences (Bennett, 1998).

1. Denial of difference, primarily where people from one culture live in isolation from others;
2. Defense, when people perceive cultural difference as a threat to their worldview;
3. Minimization, when people "try to bury cultural differences within already-familiar categories of physical and philosophical similarity" by accepting superficial differences while maintaining the assumption that "deep down all people are the same—just human." (Bennett, 1998: 27);
4. Acceptance, when people recognize the viability of different cultural norms;
5. Adaptation, when people know enough about different cultures to "intentionally shift into a different cultural frame of reference" (Bennett, 1998: 28) and modify their behavior to fit the norms of another culture;
6. Integration, the most advanced stage according to this model, when people are capable of reconciling cultural differences and of forging a multicultural identity[6].

People in the first three stages—namely those who deny difference, fear that it threatens them, or seek to minimize difference—tend to encounter difficulties and misunderstandings in intercultural communication that they are unlikely to resolve or learn from. The underlying stance common to the first three stages is ethnocentrism, the sense that one's own culture is better than others. The fourth stage, acceptance, shifts away from ethnocentrism by recognizing that other cultures have equally valid ways of seeing and doing things. However, it brings with it the risk of paralysis, because simply accepting differences is not sufficient when joint decisions and follow-up are required.

The model suggests that intercultural effectiveness is most likely to be achieved by people in stages five and six, when they are capable of actively engaging with cultural differences. Achieving the stage of integration requires extensive experience in a culture over time, so it is relevant only for the relatively narrow group of skilled

[6] According to Peter S. Adler (1998), "multiculturalism offers a potentially different sort of human being" who "is always in a state of 'becoming' or 'un-becoming' something different from before while yet mindful of the grounding in his or her primary cultural reality." He explains that the multicultural person "is not simply one who is sensitive to many different cultures. Rather, this person is always in

expatriate managers (e.g. Osland, 1995), rather than for the growing group of people whose responsibilities entail working with people from multiple cultures and for shorter periods like negotiations and task forces (Barham & Berthoin Antal, 1994). Most of the literature recommends the level of adaptation as the appropriate one for the majority of managers to strive towards (e.g. Chaney & Martin, 2000; Early & Erez, 1997; Mead, 1998).

### *The limitations to the strategy of adaptation*

There are, however, serious limitations and drawbacks to the adaptation strategy. It essentially treats national culture as an overarching unitary phenomenon whose influence on its members is quite deterministic, implying that the behavior to which one should adapt is relatively predictable. It assumes that if people know enough about different cultures they can "intentionally shift into a different cultural frame of reference" (Bennett, 1998: 28) and modify their behavior to fit the norms of another culture. Practical culture guides offer specific advice at a behavioral level for readers who do not have the time or inclination to gain enough cultural knowledge to be able to make the intentional shift between frames of reference (e.g. Chaney & Martin, 2000; Harris & Moran, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). The recommendations found in such culture guides may suffice for adapting to the greeting and eating rituals of a foreign culture, and they may provide guidance for adjusting to the business meeting practices in various countries. However, they are completely inadequate for dealing with the dynamics of interactions between culturally complex beings who want to make and implement decisions in different contexts (Osland & Bird, 2000).

Furthermore, the adaptation approach based on superficial knowledge about a national culture promotes stereotypical thinking that may be off target in a specific intercultural interaction (Adler, 2002; Schneider & Barsoux, 1997). Given the multiple cultural units and personal aspects that contribute to shaping a person's worldview and behavior, it is dangerous and even insulting to adopt a particular orientation as a

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the process of becoming a part of and apart from a given cultural context." (236). Adler notes certain risks multicultural people run, including the potential loss of the sense of authenticity (see: 238).

means of adapting to the "typically Japanese" or "typically Spanish" behavior expected of one's counterpart.

Of greater ethical concern is the fact that the adaptation approach sometimes amounts to a form of manipulation. This occurs when a person acts on the belief that if one knows enough about how people from a different culture think and is willing to adopt certain behaviors from that culture, one is more likely to succeed in getting the others to acquiesce to one's own plan. Superficial adaptation in this case masks an underlying ethnocentric stance. It is an unreliable approach to intercultural interactions because individuals rarely fit the mold attributed to a particular national culture. It is an unfruitful approach because it does not generate a broader repertoire on which to draw in developing a strategy of action in a future situation.

At a practical level, the success of a manager in international business is not assessed by his or her ability to greet and eat politely according to the norms of a different culture. This is not to say that culture-specific norms of polite behavior are irrelevant. They should definitely be attended to because they facilitate interaction and signify respect. The greater test of intercultural competence, however, lies in the ability to clarify and learn from embarrassing moments and then to enable the interaction to move forward. The success of a manager is judged by the outcomes of interactions, in the form of the quality of ideas, decisions, or measures implemented. It is therefore crucial that managers develop the ability to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds to achieve an understanding of each other's perception of reality and assumptions about the best way forward as a basis for generating those ideas, decisions, and actions.

What is called for, therefore, is a qualitatively different approach than one of adaptation. Research comparing more successful international managers with their less successful peers confirms the importance of treating each interaction as unique (Ratiu, 1983). The more successful international managers recognized that they cannot draw on a solution "that they can rely on in all situations. The approach to such specific situations that they describe involves considerable observation and listening, experimentation and risk taking--and above all, active involvement with others." (Ratiu, 1983: 141) The approach of negotiating reality provides an actionable

means to bringing the skills of observing, listening, and experimenting along with those of reflecting, expressing and inquiring to bear on making intercultural interactions effective and enabling them to generate a richer repertoire for action strategies in future.

## Expanding the repertoire: Negotiating reality

We have coined the term "negotiating reality" to name the process whereby individuals generate an effective strategy of action in an intercultural interaction by making themselves and each other aware of their culturally-shaped interpretations and responses to a given situation and expanding their repertoire appropriately. Negotiating reality involves having the ability to surface the tacit knowledge and assumptions belonging to the parties involved and to bring this knowledge to bear in the service of addressing a particular issue or problematic situation. In this process individuals become aware of the contours and dynamics of their own "cultural iceberg" and how their own backgrounds shape their perceptions, expectations and behavior as complex cultural beings (Berthoin Antal, 2002). It also means engaging with others to explore what lies under the surface of the visible tip of their cultural iceberg.

The dominant literature on intercultural management has produced large generalizations about national cultural groupings, and it has generated specific tips on how to adapt to certain practices typical of those cultures, but little practical guidance for how to make sense of and act effectively in each unique situation encountered. For managers working internationally and dealing with people from multiple cultures, the dominant literature implies that they will be effective in intercultural interactions if they learn about the cultural practices, values and assumptions held by all the various groups with whose members they need to deal. Not only is this an impossible task, it is a dangerous strategy built on a simplistic view of individuals as representatives of a single culture and a deterministic view of the impact of cultural values on behavior.

By contrast, negotiating reality is an approach for generating the necessary cultural knowledge for a situation as it arises and from this knowledge, constructing an effective action strategy. It is a strategy that is both less and more demanding than the alternative strategies in the literature. It is less demanding in terms of knowledge acquisition, because individuals do not have to arm themselves in advance with an enormous store of knowledge about as many other cultures as possible in preparation for the eventuality of meeting with people from those cultures. Negotiating reality is, however, more demanding of personal mastery, because individuals must have an active awareness of how their own cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions and behavior, an ability to engage with others to explore assumptions, and an openness to trying out different ways of seeing and doing things. Three beliefs underlie the concept of negotiating reality: (1) As human beings, all people are of equal importance and worthy of equal respect. (2) As cultural beings, people differ because they possess different repertoires of ways of seeing and doing things. (3) The repertoire of no individual or group merits *a priori* superiority or right to dominance.

Negotiating reality differs from the six-stage model described above. It does not share the ethnocentrism of the first three phases and avoids the paralysis inherent in the fourth stage of acceptance. Rather than assuming that people need to adapt to other cultures by gaining knowledge of "the other", negotiating reality involves reflecting first on the impact of one's own cultural underpinnings. It does not ask people to shed their cultural repertoire and adapt to another culture, but rather to explore and test underlying assumptions as a basis for learning new ways of seeing and doing things effectively with others people from different backgrounds. Negotiating reality differs from the integration phase, which focuses on achieving the reconciliation of cultural differences and the forging of a multicultural identity, because the primary aim of negotiating reality is learning in a specific situation. Negotiating reality provides an approach for dealing effectively with intercultural interactions as unique constellations between culturally complex beings. By participating in negotiating reality, individuals improve the quality of information available to them for constructing their strategies of action in intercultural situations.

Fundamentally the process of negotiating reality involves the various parties asking: (1) how they perceive the situation, (2) what they wish to achieve in that situation, and (3) which action strategy they intend to employ to achieve their goals. When individuals explore these three questions for themselves and gain insight into the nature of the other person's answers, they create the opportunity not only to understand how their cultural repertoires are affecting their perceptions and behavior, but also the opportunity to revise, expand and improve their definitions of the situation, their goals and their strategies. By opening themselves to changing one or all of these three elements the participating individuals become capable of significant, or "double-loop," learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Double-loop learning lays the groundwork for expanding the repertoires of potential responses to situations involving different constellations of culturally complex beings.

## *Cultural repertoires as "theories of action"*

All cultural repertoires are historically shaped by the specific contexts within which they proved effective for the members of the culture. Repertoires are essentially composed of "actionable knowledge" and theories of action, which are core concepts in action science (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985: 36; Friedman, 2000):

> Knowledge that is actionable, regardless of its content, contains causal claims. It says, if you act in such and such a way, the following will likely occur…(it) is produced in the form of if-then propositions that can be stored in and retrieved from the actor's mind under conditions of everyday life. (Argyris, 1993: 3).

When the context changes, the relevance of previously held actionable knowledge--in other words culturally determined ways of viewing reality and solving problems--can only be determined by making them explicit and testing them. Intercultural situations often require the development of new actionable knowledge. "Action science" (Argyris et al., 1985; Friedman, 2000) and the "theory of action approach" (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Argyris, 1993) are very fruitful for becoming more effective in intercultural interactions because they indicate a process for making culturally

generated "if-then" assumptions explicit and adjusting perceptions and behavior to the demands of the situation.

Exploring one's theory of action does not come naturally. People find it difficult to ask themselves questions about how they are perceiving a situation, what goals they are seeking and which strategies they are pursuing, particularly in the midst of an interaction. One reason for the difficulty is that asking such questions means becoming aware of what one is thinking and doing. Unawareness, however, is functional because it enables people to act quickly and effectively in a wide variety of frequently faced situations (Argyris, 1982; Argyris & Schön, 1974). In intercultural situations, however, unawareness becomes dysfunctional, locking people into their usual theories of action even when they lead to misunderstandings and become counterproductive. A critical skill in negotiating reality is knowing when and how to interrupt one's automatic functioning and to bring individual and aggregate theories of action into awareness.

### *The situation as a reality image*

Once individuals make themselves aware of their theories of action, the next step in negotiating reality involves testing their perceptions and interpretations of the situation against those of others. Doing so requires the ability to regard one's perception of the situation as a self-constructed "reality image", or mental model, that can be critiqued and made an object of choice (Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992; Hong et al., 2000; Senge, 1990). Reality images constructed by individuals are always approximations of reality[7]. The key insight is that human beings do not have direct, unmediated knowledge of their social (or physical) reality.

People construct their reality images from data they selectively perceive from an infinite amount of external and internal stimuli. They then interpret the data, largely unconsciously and very rapidly, through a series of culturally shaped inferences (Schön, 1983, 1987). An individual's repertoire of possible interpretations of data is

[7] The issue of mental representation is a complex and hotly debated philosophical and psychological issue. The approach described here sides with Dewey (1938) and Searle (1995), who assume that there is an objective reality even if we cannot fully know what it is.

constrained by existing culturally based knowledge structures (Adler, 2002; Hong et al., 2000; Swidler, 1986). In intercultural situations people often make very different choices in constructing their images of reality. Their cultural "frames" lead them to select certain information and/or to prefer one interpretation over another one. The result of different reality images on intercultural interactions can take the form of misunderstandings, blockage and conflict.

In the process of negotiating reality, unexpected responses from other people offer valuable cues that one's own (or the other person's) reality image may be mistaken, incomplete, or misinterpreting something in an important way. A situation may be experienced as paradoxical, puzzling, surprising, or annoying, all of which are potentially useful triggers for re-examining how one has constructed the reality image (see also Osland & Bird, 2000). The existence of different reality images signals the need to test one's own view of the situation. From the perspective of negotiating reality, one's reality images are hypotheses rather than facts. Treating images as hypotheses means being open to testing them against the information available and against alternative hypotheses. Hypothesis-testing is a key competence for international managers (Lobel, 1990). Testing involves asking questions such as: What led me to select those data? What might I have ignored or missed? What led me to make those interpretations? How closely connected is my interpretation to the directly observable data from which I constructed it? To what extent are alternative hypotheses more closely connected to the data or more logical?

By asking these questions in an intercultural interaction the participants may discover critical pieces of information or aspects of the situation that they had overlooked. They may also realize that some of their inferences are quite tenuous or that the other person's make more sense in this particular situation. They may reveal assumptions of which they were unaware and, if questioned, could change the meaning of a situation. Finally, they might agree to seek additional data that could disconfirm one, or both, interpretations. "Attention to hypothesis testing . . . enables individuals to 'try on' styles of relating and to abandon those that do not bring about the predicted result, i.e., to learn from mistakes" (Lobel, 1990: 43). This testing process never guarantees that the parties will agree or arrive at the "correct"

interpretation, but it can help determine that some reality images are more reasonable than others (Weick, 1979).

Even when people agree on their understanding of a situation, their theories may still lead them to employ very different action strategies to achieve their goals. Thus, negotiating reality means critically inquiring into these strategies and exploring the intended and unintended outcomes that are likely to result. A very valuable outcome of critically inquiring into strategies and behaviors is that people discover gaps or contradictions between their "espoused theories" (what they intended to say or do in a situation) and their "theories-in-use" (theories inferred from actual behavior) (Argyris & Schon, 1974). In doing so, they may discover that they were blind to their actual strategies and to the negative consequences of their theories-in-use.

Intercultural interactions tend to involve two types of gaps: the gap between strategy and outcome, and the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use. The first gap is relatively straightforward: strategies that are effective for achieving goals in one context may have unintended effects in a different cultural context. The second gap is more subtle: individuals often intend to pursue a strategy of open-minded appreciation of cultural difference, but slip inadvertently into becoming judgmental and seeking to impose their reality image on the other person. Only by taking inquiry deeper can individuals discover what triggered them to deviate from their espoused strategy and how they could become more effective in future interactions when faced by similar triggers.

## *Combining advocacy with inquiry*

The heart of negotiating reality is carrying out an action strategy that combines high "advocacy" with high "inquiry" as a means of exploring and testing theories of action and reality images collaboratively with the other person or people involved in the intercultural interaction. Advocacy means clearly expressing and standing up for what one thinks and desires. Inquiry means exploring and questioning both one's own reasoning and the reasoning of others. Inquiry often requires a conscious effort

to suspend judgment, experience doubt, and accept a degree of uncertainty until a new understanding is achieved (Dewey, 1938; Agryris & Schön, 1996).

The goal of combining advocacy with inquiry is discovering what makes the most sense with the information available in the given circumstances. In an intercultural interaction, this approach enables people to explore and understand each other's intentions and behaviors in light of their different cultural icebergs. When people combine high advocacy with high inquiry, they state clearly what they think/want and explain the reasoning behind their view. At the same time they strive to understand the reasoning of others and invite others to question their own reasoning. This strategy involves an openness to seeing the reason in other ways of thinking and to discovering inconsistencies or gaps in one's own reasoning. It is not a strategy of cultural acceptance or of cultural adaptation, because it does not mean a willingness to defer just for the sake of agreement. To the contrary, it requires that people persist until they feel internally committed to the results. Effectively combining advocacy and inquiry facilitates learning on all sides.

The advocacy-inquiry model encompasses four possible combinations of these two behaviors: high advocacy/high inquiry; low advocacy/low inquiry; high advocacy/low inquiry; low advocacy/high inquiry (see Figure 2). A high advocacy/low inquiry means pressing one's own point of view without exploring the perspectives of others. It is based on a goal definition of seeking to win, and is probably the most common form of interaction among business people, at least in Western countries, and a behavior reinforced by many professional training programs (Argyris, 1993). In cases where one partner has significantly greater power than the other, it may be possible to impose one's view by using the high advocacy/low inquiry strategy, but the strategy is unlikely to produce learning or commitment and it does not allow the actors to discover their own errors and expand their repertoire for future interactions.

The opposite strategy, high inquiry/low advocacy involves exploring what others think but suspending or deferring one's own judgment, and not sharing one's view with others. This strategy generates information and may even lead to insights, but it means refraining from sharing one's own ideas and perspectives even if they contain knowledge that may be critically important to generating an effective outcome of the

interaction. High inquiry/low advocacy limits the extent to which people in an intercultural interaction can take advantage of their different cultural repertoires to deal with a situation.

**Figure 2: Combining Advocacy and Inquiry**

| **High Advocacy - Low Inquiry** | **High Advocacy - High Inquiry** |
|---|---|
| • Expresses strong opinions<br>• Clear and unambiguous<br>• Ignores or hides information that does not support one's position<br>• Does not listen or listens only to refute.<br>• Overpowers defensiveness | • Treats opinions like "hypotheses"<br>• Expresses clear opinions and provides the reasoning behind them.<br>• Invites questions into one's own reasoning.<br>• Asks questions and listens in order to understand the reasoning of others.<br>• Seeks data that might disconfirm one's own opinion.<br>• Appreciates defensiveness. |
| **Low Advocacy-Low Inquiry** | **Low Advocacy - High Inquiry** |
| • Asks leading questions.<br>• Gives hints and double-messages.<br>• Camouflages threatening information.<br>• Ignores or hides information that does not support one's position.<br>• Attempts to avoid raising defensiveness. | • Asks questions.<br>• Listens and tries to understand.<br>• Refrains from judging or expressing opinions.<br>• Attempts to avoid raising defensiveness. |

A low advocacy/low inquiry strategy masks one's views by asking leading or rhetorical questions ("Don't you think we should…?") or by conveying double messages ("I agree with what you just said, but I think it misses the point…"). This strategy often *looks* like high inquiry/low advocacy, but it is aimed at getting the point across to the other person indirectly. It is not genuinely intended to gain an understanding of another perspective. This strategy is frequently regarded as clever because it seeks to achieve goals without upsetting people. It is particularly tempting in intercultural situations because it is (mis-)conceived as a diplomatic approach to working around cultural differences. The strategy often backfires, for people tend to see through the manipulation sooner or later. Even more problematic is the fact that the outcomes of the communication are ambiguous, distorted messages and a low level of trust since people expect that others will not say what they mean or mean what they say. It rarely generates learning in intercultural interactions because it

leaves issues vague and provides little opportunity for discovering errors or testing different views against each other. Over time it also increases game playing and decreases the ability to constructively engage and solve problems.

The most constructive combination is high advocacy/high inquiry, but it is also the most difficult strategy for people to pursue. It entails expressing one's own perspective and logic while also actively seeking to understand alternative views and logics. Paradoxically, people find it especially difficult to engage in high advocacy/high inquiry in the very situations when they need to learn the most from each other. Action science research has shown that the high advocacy/high inquiry strategy is very rare when people find themselves in situations of conflict and psychological threat (Argyris, 1982; Friedman, 2000; Rothman & Friedman, 2001). Our own research shows that it is rare in intercultural interactions as well.[8]

In most people conflict and psychological threat trigger strategies that are either high advocacy/low inquiry, high inquiry/low advocacy, or low on both behaviors. These strategies are all triggered by defensiveness.

## *Appreciating defensiveness*

Defensiveness is almost inevitable when conflict arises. It is a natural, often *healthy* human response to challenge and threat. Intercultural interactions are sometimes experienced as psychologically threatening because individuals find that their usually successful strategies for interacting with others and achieving goals do not work. These feelings are sometimes rooted in deeper concerns about identity, competence or self-respect vis à vis representatives of a different culture.

Most people treat their own defensiveness and the defensiveness of others as a problem, responding by attempting to overpower, avoid, or sneak around it. When people employ defensive strategies against each other, they lose their ability to negotiate reality. A high advocacy/high inquiry strategy, on the other hand,

[8] We collected data over four years in a German business school analyzing the strategies of German and foreign students in their intercultural interactions during semesters abroad, internships in international companies, and other settings.

*appreciates* defensiveness. It views another person's defensiveness as an opportunity for learning rather than as a threat. After all, the other person might be defensive for a good reason; perhaps she is right. When regarded in this way, defensiveness serves as a stimulus to inquiry rather than as something to overcome or avoid. Engaging defensiveness by combining advocacy with inquiry enables people to discover their own errors and communicates to others that their point of view is being taken seriously.

Why do people fall prey to the paradox of avoiding the high advocacy/high inquiry strategy at the very times they most need it? Argyris and Schön were puzzled by the by the rarity of high advocacy/high inquiry and the dominance of the other strategies in situations involving psychological threat. In analyzing case studies they found that the implicit goals or values underlying these strategies were maximizing unilateral control, protection of self and others, and rationality (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978, 1996). Therefore, they theorized that people's theories of action are guided by a higher order theory-in-use for maximizing these values, which they called "Model I." Model I inhibits learning under conditions of threat and accounts for much individual and organizational ineffectiveness.

Argyris and Schön proposed an alternative set of values as more conducive to learning than Model I values, namely: maximizing valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment. They called these values and the consequent behavioral strategies "Model II" (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978, 1996). Employing Model II means consciously adopting and acting upon a set of values that guide behavior toward inquiry, choice, and decisions based on sound reasoning and the best information they can obtain. It means refraining from directly or indirectly imposing one's repertoire onto others while at the same time not allowing one's self to be coerced by others. Negotiating reality and high advocacy/high inquiry are strategies to put these kinds of learning-oriented goals into practice.

Undoubtedly, using high advocacy/high inquiry in intercultural interactions requires a conscious effort for most people in business, because it entails "unlearning" (Hedberg, 1981) the behaviors explicitly or implicitly taught in many companies and training programs. It is not easy to challenge one's assumptions and to interrupt

engrained patterns of response, even if one recognizes the value of new approaches. Individuals need support in learning and unlearning, and this can be provided by courses at business schools, corporate management development seminars, and personal coaching, for example. Our experience in teaching a course in intercultural management competences over four years showed us that, with support, business students can make progress in testing new behaviors oriented to achieving the goals of maximizing valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment (Berthoin Antal & Friedman, forthcoming). Students, often skeptical and unsure about the costs of trying out new behavior, frequently ask: Is it possible to negotiate reality if the other side does not possess the same willingness to be open and the same level of intercultural competence? Actually, we have found the strategy to be surprisingly infectious, both in classroom settings and in the "real world". When one party in an interaction consistently acts according to a high advocacy/high inquiry strategy, our experience has shown that others are likely to become more open to surfacing and questioning their own reasoning. In this way, intercultural interactions can become virtuous cycles in which trust, understanding, flexibility, and experimentation increase over time.

Of course, there is always a risk that some people may take advantage of another person's openness, but this, too can be addressed directly in a high advocacy/high inquiry mode by making the observations explicit and testing them with the others. Taking the approach of negotiating reality cannot guarantee specific results, because risks remain whenever people interact, no matter how culturally competent one or all the partners are. The risk is low, however, considering the price to be paid for the known, unproductive consequences of the alternative strategies (high advocacy/low inquiry and low/low in both behaviors).

## *Goal inquiry and conflict in intercultural interactions*

Negotiating reality in an intercultural interaction includes critically inquiring into people's interests, goals, and values. Goal inquiry asks participants to clearly articulate, and question, what they want to achieve and *why*. It also helps them discover gaps between their espoused goals and the goals that are implicit in their

actual behavior. Most importantly, by treating goals as objects of inquiry, negotiating reality enables people to articulate and question *why* they chose these goals and feel so passionately about them. It helps gets at underlying values and issues of identity, revealing sources of conflict as well as common needs and dilemmas. Goal inquiry is sometimes essential for finding ways to move forward when people bring very different cultural repertoires, or frames, to dealing with a problem (Schön & Rein, 1994).

Goal inquiry draws on what Rothman and Friedman (2001) have called "the identity framing" of conflict, which emerged largely from attempts to deal with intractable ethnic conflict (Rothman, 1992, 1997) and alternative approaches to the static power-politics model of international diplomacy (Azar, 1990; Banks, 1984; Burton, 1990; Fisher, 1996; Kelman, 1982). This point of view suggests that the most intractable conflicts are really about the articulation and confrontation of individual and collective identities (Rothman, 1997). These conflicts may be expressed and negotiated in terms of competing resources or interests, but they really involve people's individual and collective purposes, sense of meaning, and definitions of self.

According to the identity frame, conflicts are rooted in threats to or the frustration of deep human needs such as dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy (Azar, 1990; Burton, 1990). Framing conflict in terms of identity suggests interventions which lead parties "to clarify for themselves their needs and values, what causes them dissatisfaction and satisfaction" (Bush & Folger, 1995: 82). From this perspective, the desired outcome of conflict is not just a settlement, but also growth, moral development, and fundamental changes in perceptions of truth or reality.

Most approaches to conflict resolution and intercultural competence treat interests, goals, and values as givens. The idea of making them objects of inquiry may sound counterintuitive or naive. However, negotiating reality treats this component of the cultural repertoire as a valuable resource. When exploring their own goals and those of their counterparts, people often discover greater space for action than they had previously perceived, and they sometimes formulate different goals as a result of the interaction. For example, they may find that a conflict that had been labeled as a

resource issue is in essence an identity issue and can only be effectively addressed within that frame, or vice versa.

## Conclusion

As organizations and management become more global, the need for intercultural competence increases in importance among a broader range of business people. Over the past twenty years the field of intercultural management has been dominated by comprehensive, descriptive models of culture that provide a basis for understanding and comparing different national cultural styles. Despite the fact that these models cannot account for the complexity of culture nor guide action in complex intercultural situations, the literature has predominantly recommended strategies for adapting to cultural differences in order to achieve desired results in intercultural interactions. Students and managers tend to try to prepare themselves for international responsibilities by learning about the practices and peculiarities of other cultures. Such strategies risk feeding stereotypical thinking and they are limited to relatively superficial advice, rather than promoting the ability of individuals to deal with the unique dynamics of specific intercultural interactions.

This paper presents an alternative approach to culture and intercultural competency. Instead of directing energies towards learning about numerous other cultures, it focuses attention inwardly to the individual's own cultural background. It recognizes individuals as culturally complex beings who build up repertoires of responses to situations based on their multiple cultural backgrounds, encompassing national, regional, organizational, professional and gender cultures among others. The link between culture and the way people perceive, interpret and behave in situations is not deterministic, because people draw selectively on their repertoires to construct strategies of action to deal with different situations. The culturally shaped repertoire of an individual reflects the knowledge that has proven effective in a given context over time, and people usually draw on their repertoires unconsciously. However, a particular repertoire may be ineffective, illogical or totally unacceptable in a different context. The competence individuals require in intercultural situations is to become aware of the repertoire and its underlying assumptions, to reconsider and to share

that knowledge in such a way that they may understand the logic driving each others' interpretations and behavior.

This approach to culture means that differences are not barriers to be overcome but rather important opportunities for generating a wider range of ideas and possible actions than would be available to any one party alone. When people with different cultural repertoires face a problem together, actively mining the differences between them expands the range of alternatives for understanding the situation and taking effective action. From this perspective, intercultural competency means having the ability to draw on the diverse cultural resources to create an effective response to the specific situation. Intercultural competency is particularly important in novel situations where received cultural wisdom may no longer be appropriate.

The objective of this paper has been to make intercultural competence "actionable" through the concept of "negotiating reality." This concept is based on the idea that human behavior is guided by "theories of action" that usually function automatically but can also be brought into awareness. Negotiating reality provides a framework for making the tacit knowledge in cultural repertoires explicit. It guides a process of reflecting on, redesigning, and testing cultural repertoires for acting effectively in specific situations. It also provides ways of engaging conflict and using it constructively to generate knowledge and commitment.

Negotiating reality enables people to actively and collaboratively understand and influence the dynamics of cultural interactions. It also permits them to take into account the complexity of culture without being overwhelmed by it. Negotiating reality aims at creating intercultural competencies that not only facilitate understanding and cooperation but also the continual testing, enriching, and improving of cultural repertoires. The focus is not on coming to agreement, adjusting, nor forging common identities, although these are possible outcomes. Rather, negotiating reality is about learning and expanding individual repertoires in order to become more effective in dealing with people as complex cultural beings in the flow of unique situations they face in a constantly changing world.

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